

The Other Confession of Guido de Brès

By Wes Bredenhof

This year (2011) we have been celebrating the 450th birthday of the Belgic Confession. Many people know that Belgian Reformer Guido (or Guy) de Brès was the author of the Belgic Confession. What few realize is that this was not the only confessional document that he was involved with preparing. There is another confession.

Background

In 1564, de Brès was serving in France as a chaplain for the Duke of Bouillon, Henri-Robert de la Marck. De la Marck was well known for his Huguenot sympathies. The Duke sent him on a mission to Brussels to meet with certain high level political officials, one other Reformed minister, and a Lutheran delegation. The goal of this conference was to unite the Reformed and Lutheran churches in the Low Countries (and hopefully elsewhere) so as to present a united front against the power of the Roman Catholic Church.

The conference concluded without any agreement. However, de Brès went home with a copy of the Wittenberg Concord of 1536. This had been drawn up in a meeting of Reformed and Lutherans as a way to resolve their differences, particularly on the sticky subject of the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. De Brès was charged by the Duke to study the Concord and to give his opinion.

A New Confession to Bridge the Gap

In a letter to the Antwerp consistory in 1565, de Brès wrote that, at first glance, the Wittenberg Concord may appear to be a bridge too far, but he was confident that it could be used partly as the basis for unity with the Lutherans. But there were other outstanding issues and those led de Brès to meet with two other Reformed pastors, Jean Taffin and Pierre van Ceulen. Meeting in Metz (in northern France), they drafted a confession dealing with baptism and absolution. De Brès had high hopes for this confession and according to one biographer (Braekman), he was even willing to risk his life for it. It was sent to Geneva for review and then also to the Reformed churches of the Low Countries.

In the end, it was all for nothing. In Geneva, John Calvin had been dead for a year, so it fell to his successor to review this new confession. Theodore Beza was not all that impressed with it. In the Low Countries, it was decided to focus on unity with the Reformed churches in France, rather than on with the Lutherans.

Unfortunately, the confession does not appear to be extant. No one has ever found it. There are two sources that mention it. The main one is the July 10, 1565 letter of de Brès to the Antwerp consistory. The other is the August 24, 1565 letter of Beza to Jean

Taffin.

The episode is insightful for it reveals the sentiments of de Brès with respect to the Lutherans. Yes, it would have been politically expedient for them to unite, but more than that, they belonged together. Throughout his writings (including the Belgic Confession), de Brès emphasized the antithesis between true and false religion. The Anabaptists and Roman Catholics were essentially the world, on the dark side of the antithesis. Not so for the Lutherans. The Lutherans were regarded as close allies in the work of Reformation. There were outstanding issues between them, but these were not viewed as insurmountable.

Comparing the Belgic and Augsburg Confessions

This is particularly evident when we compare de Brès' first confession with the Augsburg Confession. The Augsburg Confession was the earliest Lutheran confession, dating back to 1530. It had originally been written by Philip Melanchthon as a testimony to Emperor Charles V. Later Melanchthon revised the Augsburg Confession in an effort to reach out to the Reformed churches. This 1540 edition, commonly called the Variata (changed), was palatable enough to John Calvin that he subscribed it when he was working in Strasbourg. The main difference between the Variata and Invariata (the original) has to do with the doctrine of the Lord's Supper. The original Augsburg Confession said that the "body and blood of Christ are truly present and distributed to those who eat the Lord's Supper." The Variata stated that the body and blood of Christ are truly exhibited with the bread and wine to those who eat the Lord's Supper. This is not far from what the Belgic Confession says in article 35: "Yet we do not go wrong when we say that what we eat and drink is the true, natural body and the true blood of Christ."

The doctrine of salvation is also a significant commonality. Both the Augsburg and the Belgic Confession give the true biblical doctrine of original sin. Both confessions recognize the dire situation of fallen man and the need for the gospel. When it comes to the solution, both confessions sing harmony off the same page. Both confess the same doctrine of justification by faith alone through Christ alone.

When it comes to the response to our salvation, sometimes it is said that Lutherans deny or minimize the third use of the law, the law as a guide for our thankfulness. But this is certainly not found in the Augsburg Confession. Article 6 states it plainly: "Our churches teach that this faith is bound to bring forth good fruit. It is necessary to do good works commanded by God, because of God's will." And again in article 20, "...we teach that it is necessary to do good works. This does not mean that we merit grace by doing good works, but because it is God's will." The Belgic Confession speaks in the same way in article 24. Good works are necessary and inevitable for believers, but "they do not count towards our justification."

Now, as mentioned, there were still some differences. But the fact that Calvin could sign the 1540 Variata Augsburg Confession is telling. The Reformed and at least some of the Lutherans were as close at that time as they would ever get. With the passage of time, theology continued to develop and the Lutherans expanded their confessional library. If Calvin and de Brès had been alive to read the 1577 Formula of Concord, they might not have been positive about the possibilities for unity between the Reformed and the Lutherans. The Formula of Concord entrenched several distinctively Lutheran positions in extensive detail.

Conclusion

Where does that leave us today? In God's providence, the Lutherans and the Reformed went their separate ways in the sixteenth century. Yet in the sixteenth-century Low Countries, faithful Lutherans were regarded as allies, not foes. They were regarded as estranged brothers to be sought out. When de Brès wrote article 29 regarding true and false church, he did not consider the Lutherans to be the false church or a sect. Rather, de Brès was thinking of the Roman Catholic Church and the Anabaptists with those appellations.

Today there are nearly 500 years of history behind the Lutherans. Many things have changed and many who go by the name "Lutheran" would send Luther himself into a cardiac arrest. There is much unfaithfulness among Lutheran churches around the world. Yet, thankfully, there are still those where the pure gospel is preached – where the good news of Christ is clearly and powerfully proclaimed. While the doctrines of the sacraments are not as biblical as one would wish, there are Lutheran churches where they are still administered as Christ commanded. And yes, some Lutherans still do practice church discipline as well. When we encounter such Lutherans, we do well to remember our church history and the efforts of Guido de Brès to reach out to these estranged fellow believers.